

WASHINGTON POST

5 November 1986

ARTICLE APPEARED

ON PAGE A-1

Iran Says McFarlane, Others Came on Secret Mission to Tehran

Americans Reportedly Detained, Then Ousted

J By William Drozdiak
J and Walter Pincus

Washington Post Foreign Service

The speaker of Iran's parliament said yesterday that former national security adviser Robert C. McFarlane and four other Americans, posing as airplane crewmen and carrying Irish passports, traveled to Iran in September on a secret diplomatic mission, according to the official Iranian news agency.

In Washington, U.S. intelligence sources confirmed that McFarlane went to Iran "two months ago" in the latest of a series of previously undisclosed visits there and elsewhere for clandestine meetings with Iranian officials, dating back to his days as President Reagan's national security adviser.

As Reagan boarded Air Force One in Los Angeles yesterday en route to Andrews Air Force Base, he was asked about McFarlane's reported mission and replied: "No comment."

Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, speaking in Tehran on the anniversary of the seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran by Moslem militants in 1979, said McFarlane and four Americans accompanying him were detained in a hotel for five days and then expelled after offering military equipment in exchange for Iranian cooperation in curbing terrorism.

But U.S. sources in and out of government who are knowledgeable about U.S.-Iranian contacts said Tehran was only told that in return for aiding in the release of U.S. hostages in Lebanon and curtailing support for terrorism, Washington would not interfere with third countries selling surplus American arms and spare parts to Iran.

An informed U.S. government source said that while he was not familiar with the details of the McFarlane mission, he was aware that the administration was making a continuing effort to allow spare parts to reach Iran in exchange for help in reducing terrorist attacks.

The official said the effort had been going on some time before McFarlane's visit in September.

McFarlane declined to comment on yesterday's reports. On Monday, he denied that he was in Tehran "last month," referring to October, and would not comment on any other period of time or activities. He was questioned Monday after a pro-Syrian magazine in Lebanon published the first account of his trip to Iran.

White House spokesman Larry Speakes said yesterday that the administration would not comment on "stories of this type from the Middle East, stories involving hostages. . . . We just don't think it serves the interests or the safety of the hostages." He also sought to quell speculation about secret arms deals with Iran, saying, "As long as Iran advocates the use of terrorism, the U.S. embargo will continue."

In describing exchanges between McFarlane and Iranian officials, U.S. sources said Iran explained its long-term goal as seeking financial stability through higher oil prices. The U.S. sources said Washington was asked to help through its connections with Saudi Arabia to achieve that goal.

Iran's oil minister met with Saudi Arabia's King Fahd before the latest meeting of Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries in October in an effort to enhance cooperation between the two gulf powers. The recent ouster of Ahmed Zaki Yamani as Saudi oil minister also has been linked to his sharp conflict over oil policy with Iran.

The Iranian public revelations about contacts between Tehran and Washington appear rooted in an internal political power struggle over who will succeed Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, 86, as Iran's supreme leader.

Last month Iran's official news agency reported the arrest on treason and murder charges of Mehdi Hashemi, who was in charge of spreading Iran's Islamic revolution to other nations. He purportedly masterminded an attempt to smuggle explosives into Saudi Arabia aboard a planeload of Iranian pil-

grims traveling to Mecca.

Hashemi is a brother of the son-in-law of Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, Khomeini's chosen successor. Hashemi's supporters were quoted as saying Khomeini was unaware of the infighting because he is now bedridden after suffering a severe heart attack.

The Reagan administration, citing the delicacy of efforts to free other American hostages in Lebanon, has refused to explain the reasons for or nature of events behind the release of hostage David Jacobsen on Sunday.

Despite cautiously optimistic statements in Wiesbaden, West Germany, by Anglican Church envoy Terry Waite that two more hostages may be freed, some U.S. experts on Iran warned yesterday that political infighting there may already have jeopardized their early release.

Islamic Jihad, the pro-Iranian group of Shiite radicals in Lebanon who released Jacobsen and still holds two other Americans, has demanded freedom for 17 Shiites held on terror charges in Kuwait prisons in exchange for turning over the captive Americans.

McFarlane and other U.S. emissaries have insisted privately to Iranian officials, as Reagan has stressed in public, that Washington will not exert pressure on Kuwait to release any of the 17 prisoners to gain freedom for the American hostages, the sources said.

The revival of a dialogue between the United States and Iran, enemies since the Shiite fundamentalist revolution toppled the shah in 1979, would carry far-reaching consequences for the geopolitical balance in the Middle East, world oil prices and the control of terrorism.

The United States is eager not only to secure the release of American hostages held by pro-Iranian Shiites in Lebanon but to gain greater cooperation from Iran in combatting terrorism. For its part, Iran desperately needs spare parts for its American-built military equipment to sustain its six-year war with Iraq.

Continued